

*Li Na: From a Tennis Icon to a Catalyst for Social Change*

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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### **Abstract**

Sports are an integral part of most modern day societies, and sports stars can be among some of the most influential people in the world, for better or for worse. Chinese tennis legend Li Na is an example of a star athlete who has inspired millions inside her native country to challenge longstanding cultural norms and gender roles. Her success in the world of tennis has led to the dramatic growth of the sport in Asia, but it is her outspoken nature and rebellious actions that have caused her to become a beacon of hope for change within a somewhat oppressive regime. In this essay I use a number of interviews, videos, and news articles to demonstrate how Li has triggered many Chinese to reevaluate their roles in society. While she has not expressly stated any goals she has to alter Chinese culture or domestic politics, her innumerable interviews and speeches more than hint at her desire to arouse change inside and outside of her homeland.

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### **Process Analysis Statement**

When first pressed with the difficult issue of having to decide upon a senior thesis topic, I wanted to choose a subject that would be able to combine my major of political science with one of my greatest passions, tennis. Historically, sporting stars have been able to promote social and political change within countries, and sporting events themselves have the unique ability to unite people for a common goal. One of my favorite athletes of all-time is Li Na, and I had become a fan of hers not only for her tennis skills, but also for her personality and life story. I decided to pick Li Na as the subject for my honor's thesis because I want to demonstrate how an athlete can positively promote political, cultural, and social change.

The research process that I underwent while writing this thesis was most likely different from how most people went about their research for their projects. Instead of starting with scholarly articles about Li Na and her influence, I began with what had captivated me about her when I first started following her career: her interviews. I browsed YouTube and watched numerous amounts of Li's on-court interviews and victory speeches to explore if what she said could have any impact on Chinese culture and domestic politics.

What I found was that Li frequently used her humor and wit to poke fun at traditional Chinese norms, and even criticize her government and mass media. I compiled a number of her interviews and supplemented them with outside sources to try and adequately show how her words can have and have had influence on primarily younger generations in China. Written in the form of many political science works that I have read over the years, this essay should provide an in depth look at how Li has indirectly served as a catalyst for social change in China.



## **Introduction**

Chinese icon Li Na is a retired tennis player whose incredible athletic achievements seem minimal when compared to her influence and legacy off of the tennis court. Living in a culture in which the lives and careers of women are often subjugated to those of men, Li's career has been a trailblazing one that has had a remarkable impact on the culture and gender roles within China. In almost every aspect of her life, Li Na is the antithesis of the typical Chinese woman, and this refusal to conform is one of the main reasons why she is so popular both inside and outside of China. She is the primary breadwinner for her family: as her husband quit his athletic career to help Li achieve hers; she is outspoken against her government; and she even proudly sports a bright tattoo of a rose on her chest. In this essay, I will use a plethora of articles and interviews to explore the impact Li Na has had on a democratizing China and the gender roles within Chinese culture.

## **Tennis Legacy**

Before delving into the ways in which Li Na has challenged the social norms of mainstream Chinese culture, it is important to get some brief background information on her successful tennis career. Often regarded as a late-bloomer on the tennis tour, Li achieved modest success until her breakout season in 2011 when she reached her first two major finals, and subsequently won her first major championship ("Career in Review," 2017). In tennis, there are perennial tournaments known as "The Majors" that are considered the biggest titles in the sport. The four majors are the Australian Open, the French Open, Wimbledon, and the U.S. Open, and winning one of these illustrious events cements a player's legacy in the history of the game.

In 2011, Li Na became the first Asian male or female to reach the singles final of a major tournament, which she did at the Australian Open. Li would ultimately fall to former world

number one player Kim Clijsters, but a few months later Li would get another shot at glory. At the 2011 French Open, Li defeated defending champion Francesca Schiavone to win her first career major title. Li's victory garnered significant worldwide attention, but even more notoriety in her homeland. According to some reports, "[a] record breaking 116 million Chinese watched tennis champion Li Na win the French Open on television last weekend, the World Tennis Association said, making her defeat of Francesca Schiavone the most-watched sporting event in China this year" (Landreth). To put that number into perspective, that is larger than the number of people that watched that year's Super Bowl.

In the following years, Li Na would continue to achieve high levels of success on tour. In 2013, Li reached her third major final (losing to Victoria Azarenka) and reached a career-high ranking of number three in the world. The next season, Li moved up to number two in the world and won her second major title at the 2014 Australian Open ("Career in Review," 2017). Li would ultimately retire in the middle of 2014 due to a number of plaguing injuries. Having won two major titles and achieving such a high ranking, Li will almost without a doubt become enshrined in the International Tennis Hall of Fame (ITHF). According to Diane Hayes, the Vice President of International Affairs of the ITHF, "[y]ou would expect it (that Li will be nominated). She is such a global icon. Her results as a professional are remarkable. She's made such a difference in the world and she is obviously so well respected in this country and throughout the world for her accomplishments" (Raja, 2016).

### **The Chinese Sports Machine**

Now that enough information has been introduced to demonstrate Li's status as a legend of the game of tennis, her effects on Chinese culture and domestic politics can be discussed. The first way in which Li Na cemented herself as a trailblazer was in the way she defied the Chinese



government through her attempts to conduct her tennis career on her own terms. Like numerous Chinese children, Li was forcibly pushed into a career in sports at a young age. The Chinese national sports system has received heavy amounts of criticism over the years for its treatment of children as “China’s *juguo tizhi* — or ‘whole-nation sports system’ — churns out champions by pushing young athletes to their limits every day for years on end” (Larmer, 2013).

Under this system, children are placed into certain sports against their will. Li was originally slated to play badminton, but was told that her body was not suited well enough for the sport. A coach then persuaded her parents to push her into tennis. When asked about this switch, Li replied “[t]hey all agreed that I should play tennis...but nobody bothered to ask me” (Larmer, 2013). Chinese athletes are thrown into whatever sport that the parents and federation leaders think they will most succeed in, and their main goal in achieving athletic success is supposed to be to bring glory to the Chinese homeland.

Li began rebelling against the Chinese system from a young age. At age 11, Li refused to continue training during one day’s practice, and “[h]er punishment was to stand motionless in one spot during practices until she repented. Only after three days of standing did Li apologize” (Larmer, 2013). Li would state in an interview years later that she only apologized for the sake of her father, whom she loved dearly, and who desperately wanted her to become a professional athlete. A few years later, Li’s father died when she was only 14 years old. Li was playing in a tournament at the time, and her coach did not tell her about her father’s passing for several days. Following her father’s death, Li’s family started to face financial troubles and there was more and more pressure on Li to win tournaments to keep her family from falling into debt (Larmer, 2013).

Despite all of Li's hardships within the Chinese sports machine, her tennis game flourished. By age 20, she was the number one ranked player in China and was starting to improve her worldwide ranking. Everything seemed on the rise for Li until one day she just stopped. Li described that one day she decided to leave the national training center without telling anyone, carrying only a small bag of possessions so as not to raise any suspicions (Larmer, 2013). Li left a note on her desk with a letter stating that she wanted to retire. In the note, she left no explanation for why she wanted to retire, but in later interviews she hinted at a number of reasons, including "the burnout from excessive training, the outrage at her coaches' attempts to squelch her romance with a male teammate named Jiang Shan, and the debilitating period which the team leader wanted her to play through by taking hormone medicine" (Larmer, 2013).

Jiang Shan, who would later go on to become Li's boyfriend and husband, also decided to postpone his tennis career. The leaders of the Chinese tennis organization forbade players from dating or marrying one another, and that was one of the major reasons why Li and Jiang decided to retire from the game. Li and her future husband moved to Wuhan, China and attended university, where Li would study journalism (Larmer, 2013). Li was well on her way to creating a new life when she was approached by Sun Jinfang, the new head of the Chinese tennis organization, who urged her to start playing professional tennis again.

Li was hesitant at first, but she and Sun negotiated a type of experimental program that would let Li control the path of her career. According to one source,

The head of the tennis federation created this policy called the Fly Alone, Fly Solo policy which keeps [Li] still connected to the system. She hasn't rebelled against the system in terms of defecting to another country or playing for anybody



else. But she has the freedom to manage her own career now. She can choose her own coaches. And most importantly, she can keep a vast majority of her earnings, which are enormous (“Li Na One Of Few Athletes To Break From China’s Sports System,” 2013).

Prior to the creation of the Fly Alone, Fly Solo policy, the Chinese tennis federation decided who would coach the players, what tournaments they would play, and would keep around 65% of the prize money earned by the players. Under this new program co-created by Li, she assumed control of her career and greater success soon followed.

Li chose husband Jiang Shan to become her coach, a choice that would have been unacceptable under the Chinese tennis federation. This choice of Li and Jiang will be explored at a further point in this essay, but the fact that the two pursued Li’s career instead of Jiang’s is quite different from what typically occurs in Chinese culture. With Li no longer having to give over half of her prize money to the federation, she became one of the highest paid female athletes in the world. In 2014, Li earned \$23.6 million from prize money and endorsements, making her the second highest paid female athlete in the world (“The World’s Highest-Paid Female Athletes 2014”). Li was higher on the list than global superstars Venus Williams, Serena Williams, and Danica Patrick, with the only female athlete earning more than Li that year being tennis legend Maria Sharapova.

Li’s fight for more autonomy over her tennis career also improved the lives of many of her fellow Chinese players. Female Chinese tennis players have achieved vast success following the creation of the Fly Alone, Fly Solo policy. Zheng Jie and Peng Shuai reached rankings inside the top 15 in the world for singles, and both won major titles in doubles (“The rise and rise



of China's women in tennis"). Peng would even become the world number one ranked doubles player in 2014.

Li's trailblazing success has caused her to be seen as an inspiring figure to millions within her home nation. Affectionately referred to as "Big Sister Na," Li has inspired millions more Chinese to take up the sport of tennis. According to tennis legend and current tennis commentator Chris Evert, "[t]ennis has exploded in China. The country now has some 15 million tennis players; 116 million people watched Li win the French Open. That kind of exposure is crucial to our sport, and it never would have happened without Li" (Evert, 2013). The growth of the sport within China, and subsequently the rest of Asia, has caused more and more money to be pumped into the area, and larger tournaments have been created as a result.

Li's hometown of Wuhan is now home to one of the largest tournaments of the year on the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) Tour. The Wuhan Open has become one of the most prestigious tournaments on tour, and larger tournaments have been created in Shanghai, Tokyo, and other Asian cities as a result. Many are quick to say that this growth in the development of Asian tennis would not have been possible without the influence of Li. Fabrice Choquet, tournament director of the Wuhan Open, discussed how the creation of such large tournaments would not have been possible without the success and popularity of Li. According to Choquet, "[w]hat was not possible before, became possible [when Li won the French Open]. She has made tennis so popular in China...It really has taken the game to the next level, at the level of basketball, and the national sports such as badminton and table tennis" (Rossingh, 2016).

Li undoubtedly has become the catalyst for the growth of tennis in Asia. Equally impressive, her rebellion against the Chinese tennis federation led to the eventual creation of a new sports policy that gave more freedom and control to the athletes. With millions more Asian

children picking up the game of tennis, Li's total impact on the future of the game of tennis likely has not even been seen yet. Now that her impact on the Chinese sporting world has been discussed, we can start to talk about the ways in which Li has started to inspire more Chinese women to challenge traditional Chinese gender roles and culture.

### **Traditional Chinese Social Norms**

As the domestic politics and economic policies of the People's Republic of China have started to change over the years, so too have the gender roles and culture of the nation. Before discussing the ways in which Li Na has challenged traditional Chinese gender roles, some information should be introduced regarding the development of Chinese culture, over the years. Throughout most of the history of Chinese culture there has remained at least one constant theme: family is most important. Family lineage is of key importance within Chinese culture as "individuals are no more than temporary carriers who perpetuate familial male lines, with ancestors assuming spiritual roles" (Yu, 2013, p.3). The significance of the family trumps the needs or desires of an individual, and this has often led to the perpetuation of a subservient position for Chinese women.

Traditionally, the family structure and culture of China has been one that has been dominated by a patriarchal system, and as a result men have found themselves on the upside of power. Within the traditional Chinese family system,

sons are permanent members of their natal family and retain life-time financial relationships with their parents. They are expected to contribute to their parents' economic well-being even after they are married themselves. Thus, it is in their self-interest for parents to invest in sons because they may reap long-term returns from this investment (Yu, p.3).



Historically, Chinese women are often groomed to find a suitable husband and are considered only “temporary members” of their families (Yu, p.3).

As China has experienced a number of great changes over the years, most notably through the Communist Revolution, the Cultural Revolution, and a number of economic reforms, women’s rights and power have started to increase. Researchers have found that the percentage of Chinese women receiving higher education has significantly increased in the past 40 years (Yu, p.4-5). However, this increase in education has not been met with as significant an increase in the salaries and wages of women. Yu suggests that the underlying cultural norm of women being the primary caretakers has impeded the growth of women’s salaries in China as “[i]t is quite possible that this traditional division of labor in the household, with women being mainly responsible for caring for children and the household, may impede realization of women’s full potential in the labor market (5).

Yu also documents the changes in marriage in China. Historically in China, one’s marriage has often been arranged by one’s parents. Women were typically married in their early twenties, and were expected to have children and to raise them. Similarly, divorce in China has historically been almost nonexistent, and marriage is essentially universal for all adults. Yu also mentions the prevalence of the phenomenon of hypergamy, “the tendency of women to marry men of higher social states” (5). Hypergamy is often the result of women trying to bring more prestige to the family name by marrying into a wealthier or more powerful family.

In the last 30 years or so, there have been some changes in the traditional aspects of marriage within China. Since more women are starting to achieve higher levels of education, the average age of newly married women has increased (Yu, p.5). Comparably, universal marriage is less the norm in modern China as more women are starting to focus on their careers and not on

starting a family immediately. While there have been significant changes in Chinese marital norms over the years, there are certain factors that have continued to reflect traditional norms. Hypergamy remains highly prevalent even though women are receiving more education, and women are still pressured to remain in households and marry early.

While the familial structure and gender roles in China have started to develop over the years, so too has the image of the typical Chinese woman. In the Confucian era, men were not only viewed as more powerful than women, but they were also considered innately different than women. Men and women were frequently talked about in terms of yin and yang, and they were said to possess different traits as “it became common for writers to discuss gender in terms of yin and yang. Women were yin, men were yang. Yin was soft, yielding, receptive, passive, reflective, and tranquil, whereas yang was hard, active, assertive, and dominating” (Ebrey, 2017). By equating men to yang and women to yin, it was made to seem as if it were a natural phenomenon that men were (and should be) one way, and women another.

The underlying assumptions about the natural role of men and women still remains in China, but there have been signs that some of the ideas are changing. Women started to receive more rights over successive changes in regimes, and economic revolution required more women to enter into the workforce and leave their status of solely a housewife and caretaker. The traditional familial structure and roles of women have been challenged more heavily in modern times as “intellectuals and social activists leveled many criticisms against the old family system and especially the ways it limited women’s chances. Foot binding, widow chastity, parental control of marriage, and concubinage have all been eliminated” (Ebrey, 2017). While significant improvements have been made to improve the lives and power of Chinese women, it is important to recognize that they are still typically located on the downside of power with relation to men.



Further advancements are needed if women are ever to be seen as equals to men in China, or in a majority of the rest of the world for that matter.

### **Challenging Social Norms**

Li Na's familial relations reflect both the traditional norms of the Chinese family, as well as more modern trends towards changing gender roles. Li's outspoken personality however is an unprecedented characteristic for most Chinese women to possess, a trait that has often been expressed through her witty and humorous interviews. Throughout her career, Li became quite popular for her ability to win over crowds and newscasters in these post-match interviews. While the interviews would usually start out with questions about Li's match or tactics, she would often incorporate humorous examples from her personal life. While the stories she would tell would delight Western audiences and younger Chinese populations, she often angered the Chinese government and media. Li's "independent streak is part of what makes her resonate deeply with China's younger generation, who have nicknamed her Big Sister Na. But for the country's leaders (be they national, athletic or media), this is a fundamental challenge to the way the Chinese Communist Party has rallied its subjects for 64 years" (Larmer, 2013).

One of Li's most memorable interviews occurred at the 2011 Australian Open, where Li made her first major breakthrough by making a run all the way to the finals. After defeating then world number one Caroline Wozniacki in the semifinal round, Li was interviewed on court by the Australian media. The interviewer began by noting Li's hesitation and nervousness at the beginning of the match. Li attributed the nerves to not having a proper night's sleep as she said, "[l]ast night I didn't have a good evening because my husband sleeps like (audible snoring noises)" ([GameSetSmash], 2011). She followed that statement by accusing her husband of waking her up every hour with his incessant snoring.

After the laughter from the on looking crowd had simmered down, the subsequent question given to Li proposed how she was able to pull through and win the match despite not having an adequate night's sleep. Li's response was merely "prize money, no?" ([GameSetSmash], 2011). The interviewer then proceeded to acknowledge how the day was special for Li not only because of her win, but also because it was her 5<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. A surprised Li looked up to her husband wondering whether that was correct, as it appeared that she had not remembered the correct day of their wedding ([GameSetSmash], 2011).

The final question that the interviewer asked Li was regarding Li's mother. Li's mother had reportedly never seen Li play tennis, as it made her too nervous to watch Li compete. When asked whether her mother would make the trip from China to Australia to cheer on Li during the championship match, Li replied "[n]o I think she prefers staying at home. I would ask her many times, I would say 'please come with me,' [and she would reply] 'no I have my own life I don't want to come with you'" ([GameSetSmash], 2011). Upon the completion of the interview, Li left the court to an uproarious cheer from the crowd.

Another of Li's most famous speeches occurred on the same court three years later, after she won her first Australian Open title and second major crown. As is customary for the champion and finalist of a major event, both Li and her opponent were asked to give a speech. This speech is usually fairly brief, and primarily consists of thanking the crowd, the player's team, the sponsors, and the tournament staff for contributing to a successful tournament. Li's humorous victory speech was received with unanimous support from the crowd and news reporters worldwide.

Li began her speech by congratulating her opponent on a great tournament and thanking the sponsors for organizing the tournament. She then addressed her team, starting with her agent



Max Eisenbud, by stating “Max, agent, you make me rich. Thanks a lot” ([Australian Open TV], 2014). She then joked at her trainer for keeping her healthy that year, because in the previous year’s final she rolled over on her ankle three times. In a break from her humorous messages to most of her team, Li thanked her new coach Carlos Rodriguez for helping her improve her mental and tennis game. Rodriguez then motioned towards Li’s husband in an effort to get her to thank him.

Li followed Rodriguez’s advice and delivered a message to her husband that caused the crowd to break into rounds of laughter. Li’s monologue to her husband Jiang was as follows

And now my husband, even more famous [than me] in China. So thanks for him for giving up everything just traveling with me to be my hitting partner, to fix the drinks, and to fix the rackets. He do a lot of jobs. So, thanks a lot, you’re a nice guy. And also you are so lucky to find me ([Australian Open TV], 2014).

Following her recognition of her husband, Li concluded her speech, picked up her trophy, and posed for photos in front of a number of on-court photographers.

While these two speeches at the Australian Open are perhaps the most memorable of Li’s career, she had a reputation for giving humorous interviews at tournaments all over the world during the course of her career. At one tournament Li was questioned as to why Andre Agassi was her favorite player when she was growing up. Li responded that “[h]e was long hair, and he can do whatever he want. And then I just feel like -- yeah, I just think maybe some day I was like him, like I can do whatever I want” (Nguyen 2014). Andre Agassi has long been viewed as a rebel within the tennis world. At the beginning of his career he boasted long, blonde hair down past his shoulders, and he even admitted in his autobiography to have used methamphetamine

during his tennis career. The fact that Li admired such a rebellious figure provides some further insight into her views and attitude, a topic that will be discussed in a later part of this essay.

A number of other memorable quotes have shown how Li has never been one to shy away from poking fun at her husband, or at men in general. Queried about her love of shopping, Li discussed how she ignored her husband's pleas to save up more money as she is reported to have said, "Yeah. I was talk to my husband. I say, Okay, after the match we have to go [to Fifth Avenue]. He say, No. Save the money for me. I stay in the house. So after the match I will go there. I mean, I didn't care about him, so I go myself. Taking credit card. That's it" (Nguyen 2014). Asked later if she would give any advice to newly married players on tour, Li laughed and suggested to never get married. According to Li, "[b]ut after all marriage is different, totally different, because men is totally change...the woman is never [at] fault" (Nguyen 2014).

In another interview, after she and compatriot Zheng Jie made it to the semifinals of a major tournament, Li was asked where the Chinese men were with regards to tennis success. Li's response was a cheeky "[t]he Chinese men [are] in China" (Nguyen 2014). Why female Chinese tennis players have achieved much greater success on tour than their male counterparts is a topic for another essay altogether, but it is worth noting the lack of male tennis success in a predominantly male-focused culture and sports machine.

Upon first glance at the conglomeration of all of these quotes from Li during various interviews and speeches, it might be hard to see its relevance as to how Li has challenged social and cultural norms. However, through further analysis, her subtle remarks can reveal not only criticisms of the status quo in China, but maybe even a subliminal call to action for her fellow citizens to push against the norm. I am going to begin this analysis by looking at how Li contradicts the traditional Chinese views of the nature of men and women.



As was mentioned in a previous section, Confucian teachings had led to women being associated with the qualities of yin. Women in China thus have traditionally been seen as being naturally passive, receptive, soft, tranquil, and even submissive. Li's personality both on and off the court has proven to be anything but the personification of yin. Li's outspoken nature in her interviews is widely different from how a traditional Chinese woman is supposed to act. In one victory speech, Li boldly thanked her agent for making her rich, something that would have been difficult if she did not help create the Fly Alone, Fly Solo policy. Similarly, she told her husband in the same speech that he was incredibly fortunate to have her as a wife.

Li seems to have reveled in her acquired status as a rebel. When she was discussing her admiration of fellow tennis great Andre Agassi, Li revealed that she enjoyed how he could do as he pleased, and that she hoped to one day have the same freedom. If one looks at the trajectory of Li's life and career, it can be seen that she certainly did start to enjoy more freedom after she rebelled against the Chinese tennis federation. Li was able to keep more prize money, choose her own coaches, and even choose whom she wanted to marry.

On court Li continued to contradict the typical image of the Chinese woman, as during her playing career she was known to have frequent outbursts of emotion on court. Li would even scream at her husband during changeovers if there were points or games that were not going her way. Furthermore, part of Li's appearance contradicts how Chinese women are supposed to look. Li has ruffled feathers back in her homeland as "the tattoo of a red rose on her chest has been the subject of much discussion in China, where few women sport tattoos" (Chen, 2011). Even Li's tennis game is frequently described as aggressive, and even erratic at times. Thus, in very few ways does Li reflect the personality traits of the idea of yin.

Not only does Li Na not embody all of the characteristics of a traditional Chinese woman, but many of her comments and actions illuminate that she does not conform to typical Chinese gender roles either. To start, Li is the primary breadwinner for her family. Her husband Jiang quit his pursuit of becoming a professional tennis player to become her coach. Years into her career, Li decided that she wanted to have a new coach, and subsequently replaced her husband as her primary coach. As she stated in her victory speech at the 2014 Australian Open, her husband then assumed the roles of becoming her hitting partner, stringing her rackets, and making sure she had the proper drinks while on court.

This is not the only way in which Li's relationship with her husband differs from Chinese marital norms. Not only is Li the primary earner for her family, but she is even said to have proposed to her husband. According to one source, Li "is reported to have popped the question to him on Valentine's Day in 2005 with a box of chocolates" (Chen Shirong, 2011). In democratic nations like the United States, it is rare that a woman proposes marriage to a man; in China it is practically unheard of. Li's assertion in another interview that men are the reason for marital strife and that women are never to blame further demonstrates how she is not close to being in a passive, subservient position to her husband.

With regards to the traditional Chinese gender roles, it would appear as if Jiang plays the role of what a woman would normally do. Li mentioned in one response about her love for shopping that not only did she ignore her husband's desire for her to save money, but she left him at home and took their credit card to shop by herself. Her light-hearted blame of her husband's unyielding snoring for causing her to almost lose a match is another (comical) example of how she does not conform to the typical subservient, submissive role of a wife.



What is incredibly interesting is that while Li is the antithesis of the traditional Chinese woman, her interviews hint that her mother is a prime example of that ideal. In her 2011 interview at the Australian Open Li discussed how her mother had never seen her play because it made her too nervous. In the same interview she mentioned how she pleaded for her mother to come with her to a tournament, but her mother replied that she “prefers to stay at home.” In just these two sentences, Li brought up the usual characteristics of the Chinese woman (someone with a passive personality who stays at home) and then proceeded to poke fun at it. Li may not have meant it as an outright criticism of traditional gender roles within China, but to her audience it certainly could appear that way.

### **Lasting Impact**

Through careful analysis of a number of Li’s interviews and speeches, it is clear that she is a rebellious figure who combats many of the cultural and social norms within China. Her influence on the sport of tennis has already been demonstrably proved as millions more Asian children have taken up the sport, and bigger tournaments are being created in the region each year. It is also clear that many leading officials in the Chinese government, media, and sporting organizations are not too keen on Li’s outspokenness, as they fear it could lead to some civilian unrest. What remains to be seen, however, is how great an impact Li’s legacy can have on the development of lasting social, cultural, and/or political change in China. In this section, I am going to give my reasons why I think Li’s actions will lead to greater change in the future.

A process known as democratization often accompanies social change, particularly with regards to the development of more rights for women, minorities, or other subjugated groups. Democratization, as its name suggests, is a process by which a country’s political system or ideas began to transition to that of a democracy. There has been heavy debate among political

scientists regarding whether China will undergo democratization, or even if it is currently in the middle of the transition.

Political scientist Shaohua Hu believes that China is not currently in a state of democratization and believes that it will be difficult for such a process to occur in the near future. According to Hu, "obstacles to China's democratization arose from five factors: historical legacies, local forces, the world system, socialist values, and economic development" (Ming). Hu hypothesizes that Chinese leaders are hesitant to adapt to many Western ideals because of a fear that it would lead to a type of Western colonialization. Because Westernization and democratization often go hand-in-hand, Hu does not see democratization in China in the near future.

Still, others see some recent trends in Chinese politics as evidence to suggest that democratization may be possible. In the last 30 years or so, direct elections have become more frequent in villages and smaller Chinese cities. Direct elections are a fundamental block of many democracies, and this seems to go against the communist methods that occur at the regional and national levels of the Chinese political system. According to Wang, "[t]here seem to have appeared two routes to advance the democratization process: either to start with the intra-Party democracy and then to expand democracy to the state politics, or to start from the grassroots and then spillover to the provincial and national level political institutions" (Wang). The appearance of direct elections at the local level is an example of democracy starting at the grassroots level. Intra-party democracy on the other hand occurs when members of a political party start to vote for who should be in leadership positions within the party.

I believe that democratization is possible in China, and that the process is already in the beginning stages of occurring. While I agree with Wang's assessment of the two ways in which



to speed up the process of democratization, I think it needs to be supplemented by celebrities and other key figures advocating for social change. This is why I hypothesize that the impacts of Li's rebellion against Chinese social norms will be felt even more strongly in the future. I believe that democratization is necessarily tied to social development, and that when megastars like Li Na start to challenge the status quo, real change is possible.

There is little literature available today regarding the quantifiable impacts of Chinese celebrities on social change within the nation, and I believe that the Chinese government will do everything in its power to try and quell anything like another cultural or social revolution. However, I think that by looking at the story of Li Na, one can see that change is possible. The once unwavering Chinese tennis federation eventually succumbed to the demands of Li, and she paved the way to greater freedom for many Chinese athletes. This one example shows how even oppressive, state-run programs will adapt if placed under enough pressure. Once enough citizens get fully behind the effort for promoting long-lasting social, cultural, or political change, the government will have no choice but to try and heed to some of their wishes, or face considerable backlash.

I predict that the full extent of Li's effect on Chinese gender roles and culture has not yet been fully realized by the Chinese public. Li's retirement from the sport almost certainly has diminished her daily influence on the younger generations to some degree, but I think that upcoming Chinese generations will view her as an example for how to rebel against authority. Similarly, I think that Li's influence on Chinese women will be even greater. I believe that young Chinese women and girls will see how Li has not conformed to the ideals of mainstream Chinese culture. Like what has been seen in Japan and other Asian nations in recent years, I

hypothesize that more women will pursue their own wishes and careers. Li will undoubtedly serve a model for how Chinese women can achieve major success.

### **Conclusion**

Li Na will go down in the history books as one of the greatest players of the game of tennis, as well as one of its most popular characters. Her fiery game, quick wit, and humorous personality caused her to be loved by millions of fans both internationally and within her home country. Li has proven herself to be unlike the traditional Chinese woman, and has courageously battled against the Chinese government to try and achieve greater rights and freedom. Through her outspoken and sometimes controversial interviews and victory speeches, Li has criticized the cultural and social norms of her homeland, much to the chagrin of the Chinese government. Li's impact on the game of tennis has quantifiably been measured, but the full extent of her influence on Chinese culture remains to be completely seen. It is through icons like Li Na that lasting social change can occur, and future Chinese generations will be indebted to her should social and cultural changes maintain.



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